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SUBJECT: BELARUS: REGIME BLOCKING FREEDOM OF TRAVEL

¶1. (SBU) As reported previously, the GOB introduced a new database at the beginning of 2008 to track its citizens as they travel abroad. Entered into the database are an estimated 100,000 names (over one percent of the population) of persons who are not allowed to leave Belarus, ostensibly due to pending legal concerns. However, this technological step is clearly being used as a political tool to restrict the freedom of travel and emigration of opposition politicians and civil society activists. At the present time, post is aware of 17 persons, including at least two previously allowed to leave Belarus without restriction as recently as December 2007, who are affected by this new regime tactic.

¶2. (SBU) The first example made known to us was Anatoliy Lebedko, chairman of the opposition United Civic Party, who joined a Belarusian opposition delegation for meetings with the President and Secretary Rice in December 2007. Soon after his return from Washington last year, Lebedko received a letter informing him that he had been added to the GOB database and that he would not be allowed to leave Belarus. Lebedko tested this in early 2008; while trying to cross the land border into Lithuania, an "exit refused" stamp was prominently placed in his passport by the Belarusian border police.

¶3. (SBU) Sixteen others who have been blocked include: former political prisoner Sergey Skrebets; members of the democratic youth opposition group "Malady Front" Zmitser Dashkevich, Zmitser Fedaruk (who also met with President Bush in December), Yekaterina Solovyova, Yaroslav Grishchenko, and Ivan Shilo; democratic activist Aleksandr Atroshchenkov; Belarusian Popular Front youth leader Ales Kalita; human rights lawyer Andrey Sushko; human rights activist Valeriy Shchukin; members of the independent Union of Poles Anzhelika Boris and Igor Bantsar; and students Alyaksandar Barazenska (on an independent scholarship to Poland) and Oleg Grubich (attending the European Humanities University in Vilnius). Malady Front members Nastya Palazhanka and Boris Goretskiy were initially blocked from leaving, but we are told that restrictions on them were subsequently lifted.

¶4. (SBU) The regime's actions against the U.S. Embassy in Minsk make it all but impossible to maintain a dialogue on emigration and other human rights with Belarus, which retains a non-market economy. That fact -- combined with these restrictions on travel as well as many other ongoing acts of repression -- justifies very careful review of this year's waiver of Jackson-Vanik amendment provisions for Belarus.

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